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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [TS](#)
SUBJECT: FM ABDALLAH CRITIQUES EMBASSY VISITS TO HUNGER
STRIKE

REF: A. TUNIS 2395
[1](#)B. TUNIS 2329
[1](#)C. TUNIS 2034
[1](#)D. TUNIS 2404

Classified By: Ambassador William Hudson for reasons 1.5 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: Ambassador met with the Foreign Minister on October 31 to discuss recent visits by the Embassy to the group of eight civil society leaders currently on a hunger strike to protest the lack of freedom of expression and association in Tunisia, and to demand the release of political prisoners (refs A and B). Foreign Minister Abdallah defended Tunisia's record on these issues, pledged that further progress would be made, "little by little", and asked what concrete steps Tunisia should take. Ambassador reiterated several suggestions, including the authorization of new newspapers and NGOs, that we have raised on multiple occasions. End Summary.

[1](#)2. (C) Ambassador met with Foreign Minister Abdelwaheb Abdallah on October 31, three days after a one-on-one meeting on Tunisian preparations for WSIS (ref D). Abdallah began by noting the increasing presence of conservative Islam in Tunisia. Ambassador said that Tunisians were widely and positively viewed as being religiously tolerant. Abdallah replied that previously Tunisians had been even more tolerant, but that there had been a "regression." He said that in past decades, during the month of Ramadan, secular Tunisians could be observed eating and drinking, even alcohol, in sidewalk cafes during the daylight hours of fasting. Now however, such acts would be considered scandalous. Abdallah commented that there is an increasing trend toward religious practice among Tunisians and that he personally has noticed full parking lots at mosques. He emphasized that there is a careful balance between the "good practice" of strong religious behavior, and "deviations" that could lead to extremism.

[1](#)3. (C) Abdallah said he realized the USG and GOT were both concerned with the success of the upcoming UN World Summit on Information Society (WSIS) to be held next month in Tunis. He said that the eight civil society activists currently on a hunger strike to protest lack of freedom of expression and association in Tunisia, and to demand the release of political prisoners, were attempting to sabotage and pull attention away from WSIS. Abdallah said that representatives of several embassies had visited the hunger strikers on multiple occasions. (NB: Embassy HROff has visited twice, as have representatives from the UK embassy and the EU delegation. The German ambassador and German Federal Delegate for Human Rights and Humanitarian Affairs Tom Koenigs visited the hunger strikers on October 27). Abdallah said that he understood the necessity to visit once, but that multiple or regular visits were construed as signs of support, and encouraged the hunger strikers. He stated that the office site of the strike was open to all visitors, that their phones were not blocked, and that they had access to

medical care.

¶4. (C) Abdallah then launched a defense of Tunisia's record on freedom of expression and association, saying that the freedom that the hunger strikers had to carry out their activities demonstrated the GOT's commitment to these goals. He then showed a copy of opposition paper Al-Mawqif which had a picture of the hunger strikers on its front page. (NB: Al-Mawqif has a distribution of about 4000. Despite the presence of journalists from five mainstream Tunisian dailies at a hunger strike press conference on October 19, there was no other local press coverage). Abdallah asked if anyone could provide a list of the political prisoners currently in Tunisian prisons. He said that the prisoners often referred to by human rights groups were in fact "condemned for acts of violence" and other security related crimes. Abdallah closed by asking the Ambassador what we would suggest the GOT do in concrete, specific terms to show progress in these areas.

¶5. (C) The Ambassador began by noting the GOT's measured response to the hunger strike. He said that the free access to the hunger strikers as well as their ability to hold a press conference without interference had been positively noted. Taking up the Foreign Minister's request for specific suggestions for positive concrete actions, the Ambassador said that the GOT's willingness to make progress on freedom of expression issues could be demonstrated, for example, by legalizing pending newspaper applications, allowing the creation of new newspapers and giving permission to journalists to speak more freely. The Ambassador mentioned the GOT refusal to allow the registration of Lotfi Hajji's Tunisian Journalists' Syndicate (ref C), as both a freedom of expression and association issue. The Ambassador noted that the right to free expression and association of non-violent groups were at the foundation of a democracy, and that these freedoms would help contain, not encourage, fundamentalist and violent tendencies. The GOT needed to take a political decision to move forward in these areas.

¶6. (C) Abdallah responded that these freedoms were important, and that Tunisia would make progress "little by little". He said that responding boldly now would run the risk of appearing to buckle under pressure from the hunger strikers, and that it was critical that "governments be respected." Abdallah said there had been some opening up, and that another newspaper may begin printing as early as the end of this year. However, he said there were some pending applications that would never be approved, because the individuals applying were "harebrained", and the GOT could not risk "playing with public opinion." (NB: Abdallah is likely referring to well-known human rights activists such as Radia Nasraoui and Sihem Ben Sedrine, both who lead illegal NGOs and have been personally denounced by GOT officials and the mainstream press). On political prisoners, Abdallah said that there may be some prisoners released as per custom on the November 7 holiday.

¶7. (C) Comment: The hunger strikers have gained enough visibility to irk the RCD machine, which is geared up to make the upcoming Summit as smooth as possible. Abdallah seemed most interested in what the GOT could do to minimize the impact of the hunger strike and divert U.S. and other countries' attention from the strikers' demands. The GOT continues to maintain that these activists represent fringe elements, are potentially harmful to Tunisian society and are supported by radical islamists; we continue to maintain that their basic demands of freedom of speech and association are legitimate and that Tunisia has publicly committed itself to reform.

HUDSON